

Chapter 9
Rethinking the Hindu Tradition
Dr. Tim Callaway

Chapter Summary

Archaeological discoveries and new thinking about the Aryans have led to a radical revision of the way many educated Hindus understand their own religious tradition. Chaudhuri, in his popular if controversial work *Hinduism: A Religion to Live By*, challenges existing ideas about Hinduism's origins maintaining we simply lack fixed archaeological points with which to date documents like the Rig Veda and Bhagavad Gita, therefore the entire field is open to speculation.

Lacking firm external evidence or extant texts that can be accurately dated, many scholars turn to a comparative-religion approach to date Hindu literature

Although most classical Hindu texts are written in Sanskrit, this merely gives us a clue as to their dates, nothing more. The earliest inscriptions containing Sanskrit words appear during the first century BC; what is evident is that by the fifth century AD, Sanskrit was a common language used in India. Inscriptions mentioning the names of Hindu gods have been found from all over India dating from the second century BC to the fourth century AD. There is ample evidence by the seventh century AD of full-blown Hindu worship such as is known today. Art objects add little to our knowledge of Hinduism before the fifth century AD; this is in sharp contrast to the abundance of Buddhist art from earlier periods.

The German writer and critic Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) introduced a method of dating literature based on the supposed dates at which certain ideas became popular, yet even this method has not proven to be foolproof; Hindu religious traditions overlap and do not fall into neat evolutionary categories.

Written accounts by foreign travelers confirm the general impression of Hinduism gained from archaeological sources. Greek and Roman authors incorporated extracts of a Greek account of India from the time of Alexander the Great's expedition there (327–325 BC). Yet, in agreement with archaeological evidence, none of them mention the names of Hindu gods, only hints of gods like Shiva and Krishna. They do confirm the existence of a small priestly class known as Brahmins and regarded as great philosophers. The Greeks also mention wandering teachers, recluses, and hermits while commenting on the popularity of religious discussion among the Indians.

The fifth century AD Chinese writer, Fa-Hien, gives a fairly comprehensive account of Indian life and describes only Buddhism in detail but makes some mention of rivalries between Hindus and Buddhists. Another Chinese writer, Yuan-Chwang, gave a very different picture of Hinduism 200 years later, talking at length about numerous temples and the various gods that Hindus worshiped. He notes that in one kingdom, Buddhists had to worship secretly for fear of persecution by Hindus and describes the Ganges as a sacred river that was central to Hindu life.

Even so, taking these pieces together with the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, we know very little about Hinduism before the fifth century AD. Yet what appears between the fifth and seventh centuries AD is Hinduism as we know it today. Hinduism as a coherent religion belongs to the same creative era that saw the birth of Christianity, Rabbinic Judaism, and Islam.

During this period, a series of cities grew up along the Ganges River where numerous temples are now found (Buddhism and Jainism also thrived at this time). Three forms of religious practice are identifiable in the Hinduism of this period: (1) yoga in its various forms; (2) puja, or the adoration of images of the gods/great teachers; and (3) sacrifices associated with temple rituals and seasonal festivals. The Hindu tradition should be thought of as a matrix or ever-changing mosaic, bound together by certain underlying assumptions and common mythological stories.

At its core, Hinduism is the religion of Hindus living in small villages and extended family communities. Various Hindu groups have unique practices such as daily devotions, community festivals, and pilgrimages, but all Hindus share a common literature, philosophical traditions, great festivals, and pilgrimages. The Hindu tradition should not be forced into a mold that concentrates on specific institutions. True, institutions such as great monasteries existed within the Hindu tradition and there are distinct Hindu movements such as Ramakrishna and Hare Krishna. Yet such movements within Hinduism are not as definitive as the eleventh-century breach between Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism during medieval Christianity. Nor is there anything in Hinduism similar to the Protestant Reformation.

Some scholars argue that Hinduism as known today emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a result of British rule in India. The argument here is that prior to the eighteenth century, India was a continent inhabited by numerous ethnic groups lacking a unified religion or religious system. Typical British history of India presents a view of the Indian past as one in which Indians were unified by religion and the Sanskrit language.

Hindus have a rich mythology about gods like Shiva, Kali, Vishnu and a host of others as recorded in books such as the Mahabharata. Hinduism does not have a developed theology but contains numerous intellectually challenging philosophical systems and endless religious speculation. The earliest Hindu scriptures, the Vedas, possess only rudimentary philosophy and are primarily concerned with practice and issues like sacrifice. Upanishads advance a more in-depth philosophy. Hindus recognize six orthodox schools of philosophy, each with its own collection of writings or Sutras.

Perhaps the best known Hindu school of philosophy in the Western world is Yoga, a discipline that leads to salvation. But the practice of yoga or meditation exercises should be distinguished from the philosophical system itself. The appeal of the system is found in the practical ways it guides practitioners toward attaining liberation for the soul. Yoga accepts an essentially pessimistic view of life, teaching that release from the cycle of births and deaths is the only hope for human beings. To attain release, one must become detached from the world; when, through the practice of yoga, this occurs, liberation may be attained.

One of the first and most influential Hindu reformers was Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833). An admirer of Christianity and the teachings of Jesus, he sought to remove from Hindu life what he saw as ethically questionable practices such as suttee (voluntary or involuntary deaths of widows), sacrifices, and most aspects of the caste system. He published a translation of the five main Upanishads in 1816 and *The Precepts of Jesus* in 1820, hoping to bring Hindus back to what he saw as their religious roots. Influenced by Unitarian missionaries, he taught a monistic system involving belief in one true God, rejected the worship of idols, and called for social reform.

Sarasvati (1824–1883) was the next great Hindu reformer and founded the Aryan Society in 1875. Ramakrishna (1836–1886) and his disciple, Vivekananda (1863–1902), provided modern Hindus with a contemporary creed to live by, combining idealisms of the Hindu thinker Sankara with that of Hegel, which was so popular in the Christian schools in India at the time.

Vivekananda taught that behind the illusory nature of our world lies its true reality and that all worship is the worship of the one God even though worshipers express this in numerous ways. We all participate in the divine and are, in a sense, divine ourselves. We must love all our fellow humans and develop a universal ethic of love that leads to social involvement.

Out of such traditions the Hindu reformers of the twentieth century emerged. One of the greatest was Radhakrishnan (1888–1975) who became Indian prime minister from 1962–67. His book *The Hindu View of Life* is a classic statement of modern Hindu beliefs. Prabhupada (1896–1977) came to the United States and founded the Hare Krishna movement in 1966, the most successful Hindu mission to the West. The growing acceptance of Indian philosophical ideas by people in the West coincided with the mass migration of skilled Indians to Europe and North America, thereby helping Hinduism become a truly worldwide tradition.